

THE 13th INTERNATIONAL CONFERENCE OF



ISSEI

International Society for the Study of European Ideas

in cooperation with the University of Cyprus



Perceptions of (Ancient) Female *Heroism* in

Cypriot Historical Plays of the twentieth century

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The nation-state emerged on the European political scene approximately three hundred years ago, and brought forth great changes. The Enlightenment and Romanticism, as movements which had carried the rhetoric of nationalism, contributed in changing the way societies and individuals perceived themselves. A prime example is the figure of the romantic hero, who in literature rises as an ideal version of modern humans. Nineteenth century British Romantic rhetoric goes as far as to place female virtue in a similar context, whereby “a woman’s private virtues now had a public relevance. They had to be seen as crucial to the nation’s welfare”¹. On many occasions, these heroes and heroines were hosted in historical literature, including historical drama, a popular literary form in Europe since the middle of the eighteenth century.

Historical drama developed rapidly in Cyprus (in the Greek-Cypriot community) from the 1870's onwards, producing an impressive total of one hundred and forty published plays. Within that group, we find twenty plays related to Antiquity published from 1878, up until 2004². The themes of the plays are drawn from the corpus of Ancient Greek tragedies, the realm of the mythical and Cypriot history. In them, female protagonists are prominent: Dimonassa, Ksanthippe, Electra, Penelope, Hero and others. Among these women, the character of queen Axiothea of Pafos, wife of king Nikoklis, whose story unfolds in the fourth century B.C., presents great interest. No less than three plays are written in relation to the last moments and the death of Nikoklis and Axiothea: *Nikoklis–Axiothea* by K. Nikolaides (1952³), *Axiothea*, by Kipros Chrisanthis (1968), and *Axiothea* by Mona Savvidou-Theodoulou (1982).

A glimpse at the plays' historical context, which is 310/309 B.C. is necessary for understanding the historical source of the story. The throne of Pafos⁴ (one of eleven Cypriot kingdoms) became the seat for the Kinyrad kings⁵, who carried the title of “temporal rulers of Pafos and at the same time High Priests of Aphrodite”⁶, and was even mentioned in Homer⁷. In the 4th century B.C., the Cypriot kings' support for Alexander, the victorious king of the Macedonians, was a political move which for a time ensured them the status of local independence they had enjoyed in their previous regime. However, this phase was to be short-lived, since Alexander died in 323 B.C. and the conflicting ambitions of his generals resulted in the extended Wars of the Successors, in which Cyprus inevitably became entangled.

For two of the principal rivals for the throne of Alexander, Ptolemy and Antigonus, the island constituted a source of wealth and a strategic strongpoint. The Cypriot kings, one after another, took sides in the feud and as a result of the power struggle several of them were killed, Nikoklis among them. The events in 310/309 B.C. surrounding the death of Nikoklis are described by historiographers Diodorus and Polyainos. Diodorus mentions that Nikoklis commits suicide by hanging, and Polyainos reports that his brothers follow suit. The latter then reports on the fate of

the women: they slaughtered their children before the crowd gathered around the palace, and then they set fire to the palace. He relates how the women threw themselves in the fire and that in fact Axiothea first stabbed herself with a sword and then fell into the fire “so that the enemies would not take her lifeless body”⁸. Diodorus reports that the women went ahead with their suicide in spite of the fact that Ptolemy had spared their lives and guaranteed them safety⁹.

Taking into account the historiography, the depiction of Axiothea in all three plays written on these events is of special interest. The play by Kipros Chrisanthis, however, offers a unique perspective on the perceptions of female heroism in antique Cyprus by twentieth century playwrights. The play was first published in 1967, then in 1968 and finally in 1989¹⁰. In its structure and format, determined by the existence of a chorus, pompous lyrical language and an exemplary heroine in Axiothea, it is very reminiscent of a neoclassical tragedy. The play starts with a discussion of an omen and the presentation of the main characters of the play, all of them women: the daughter and sisters-in-law of Axiothea, as well as two female slaves. The action of the play commences with news of the sacrifice of the men, and concludes with the sacrifice of the women.

In the all-female cast the development of the secondary characters is also interesting to note. Each of the women presented engages in her own personal struggle through the development of the play: the nameless Wet-nurse is an intelligent woman, shrewd even, trapped in the life of a slave; Arsinoe, the daughter of Axiothea, is trapped in her innocence and sheltered upbringing; Phaedra is a foreign woman, married into the family to a man she does not love and longs to escape; Evrinoe is the happily married wife of another of Nikoklis’ brothers, desperate and hesitant when time comes to sacrifice her children; and finally Cymothoe, a slave, is longing to escape but, being cowardly, she is afraid of the repercussions. Last but not least, the overshadowing character of Axiothea, with her oratorical qualities and solid principles. No men are presented on stage at any phase of the action of the play.

The model of heroism for the male and female characters in the play is located in the intersection between the public and private spheres. Relevant to the study of this play, Jurgen Habermas offers a historical perspective for the term 'public sphere', by referring to the 'medieval public spheres' and differentiating them from the 'bourgeois public sphere'. This correlates with the time when the play was written, namely the direct aftermath of the colonialist era, when Cyprus had not yet become a bourgeois society, but was still in transition. Therefore, Habermas' description of the medieval public sphere is quite fitting to the time and socio-political circumstances: "a public sphere directly linked to the concrete existence of a ruler. As long as the prince and the estates of the realm still 'are' the land, instead of merely functioning as deputies for it, they are able to 're-present'; they represent their power 'before' the people, instead of for the people."¹¹. Therefore in the play, the absent Nikoklis and his male courtiers function as the medieval public sphere: their link to the people of the kingdom is that of representation, the ties are such that citizens and rulers do not share decision-making. The identification of the rulers with power is absolute. Needless to say that there is no relationship of exchange between the male rulers and the people, since the people are not represented in the play. There is one exception though, the Wet-Nurse, but her role as the transporter of news from the public to the private sphere is seen as suspicious by the other women.

The antipode, the private sphere, is represented by the world of the women and the home within the palace. It is the space shared by Axiothea, the royal families and the slaves. The dichotomy between the two worlds is clear and Axiothea is the main carrier of that strict distinction. This is manifested in many ways. Firstly, in terms of accessibility: on the one hand, upper class women do not have access to the public space themselves, but through the slaves who bring news of what happens on the outside. It is mainly the Wet-Nurse who is marginally connected with the public sphere, but even that connection is achieved in an indirect manner. She brings to the women word of what happens in the public sphere by eavesdropping at the cost of

being considered ethically inferior by them. On the other hand, the men never set foot in the private space, nor is there any other activity announced in the private space between men and women except for conjugal relations.

In the following speech, where Axiothea attempts to convince the women that suicide is the correct way forward, the playwright exemplifies the distinction between the two spheres:

«Φαίδρα, ο Ετεοκλής, ανάξιος σύνευνος

ως τον καλούσες, πέθανε έντιμα

με το δικό του χέρι.

Κι' εσένα, Ευρυνόη, ο σύνευνος

τον ίδιο θάνατο προτίμησε

παρά να πέσει δούλος στον εχτρό

και να εξευτελιστεί.

Εμείς αδύναμες γυναίκες, το παράδειγμα

στων ομοκρέβατων την πράξη βλέπω»¹²

In spite of the rigid divide between the two spheres, the men and the women share a common space, defined by their marital duties. The two worlds are vividly described in the monologue, with the world of the men, the public sphere, being a space of rule, authority and free (heroic) will. The men have chosen how to represent themselves in the context of this political arena, through their suicide. The world of the women, the private sphere of the palace as home, is – according to Axiothea, who is the carrier of this rhetoric- weak and the example of the men is the way forward. In spite of the lack of communication between the two spheres, the intermediate space they share which is their conjugal bed, places the decision of the women in a new framework. The essence of their relationship and communication focuses on the purely corporeal ties couples share, creating an environment where male physical strength can dominate and

subdue a woman. Through this short speech, in which the men are not identified as partners or even husbands, but as the people the women share their beds with, one can trace the pattern of the heroism of the women in the heroism of the men. By virtue of their conjugal relationship, the women are bound to the decisions of their husbands and have a duty to follow their (heroic) example.

The character of Axiothea presents consistency in terms of her rhetoric: she remains attached to the values of honor and duty, which have been dictated by the world of the men. These are determining factors in her decisions, but they are also used as arguments in order to convince the other female characters of the correctness of voluntary self-sacrifice. They all shared their beds with worthy and heroic men, just as she did. Her only moment of hesitation is brought forth by the omen at the beginning of the play, at which moment, as a classic Romantic heroine, she acknowledges the uncontrollable forces of the universe but decides to move ahead nonetheless.

In contextualizing Axiothea's un-negotiated patriotism, which can be characterized as "the Cypriot version of Greek nationalism"¹³, one can detect the dominant traits of the socio-politics of the mid twentieth century in Cyprus. The 1950s and early 1960s were a time when the men and women of Cyprus were called to arms, and were expected to perform their patriotic duty. The desired union of Cyprus with the Greek state (*Enosis*) was the purpose of the EOKA uprising in the 1950s, as well as of various groups and para-military organizations during the 1960s and early 1970s. One could even argue for a governmental line not adverse to such a prospect, with President Makarios' stance, exemplified through his famous 1968 statement regarding the *tangible solution*, namely independence, and the *ideal solution*¹⁴, aka union with Greece. The 'Ethnarch', an epithet attributed to Makarios, is indicative of his stature and power: he is the lead figure, the ruler many of the characters in historical plays are modeled after.

Makarios and other heroic personae of the time, represent the public sphere, the space determining the correct path. In line with Habermas' rhetoric, these heroic personae do not represent the land, they are the land. Their authority and validity in turn inspire the private sphere, the men and women living in the parallel world outside the haute decision-makers. The voice of the author tracks the course of the hegemonic rhetoric of the time when the play was written, a rhetoric dictating patriotic duty as one of a social struggle for union with Greece, through the decision-makers inhabiting the public sphere, to the people, dwellers of the private sphere.

In conclusion, Axiothea's perceived heroism in Chrisanthis, her dignity and honor, is in truth the female version of a male doctrine. The decision to sacrifice her life does not come from the character herself, but from the world of the men, the public sphere, the carriers of the hegemonic nationalist rhetoric. It is interesting to note that only at the end of the play does Axiothea discover her own rhetoric, by deciding the manner in which the women will take their own lives and those of their children. As morbid as this may be, the only decision she makes is not whether or not she dies, but the manner in which the act will be executed.

¹Greenblatt, Stephen (Ed.), Abrams, M.H. (Ed.), Stilling, Jack (Ed.) et al, *The Norton Anthology of English Literature, Vol. D: The Romantic Period*. (NY: W. W. Norton & Company, 2006), 5.

²The dates used here refer to milestones of Cypriot history. The year 1878 marks the transition from Ottoman rule to British colonial rule and 2004 is the year of Cyprus' accession into the European Union.

³The dates mentioned are the dates of the first publication of the plays.

⁴Also known as Palaepafos (modern day Kouklia), a city-kingdom in the southern coast of Cyprus.

⁵The Kinyrad line starts with the mythical king Kinyras, and is already in place by the 8th century when the city-kingdoms are formed.

⁶Maier, Franz Georg "Paphos in the History of Cyprus", in *Κύπρος: από την προϊστορία στους νεώτερους χρόνους*, ed. Jean Pouilloux, J.N. Coldstream, Franz Georg Maier et al. (Nicosia: Cultural Foundation of the Bank of Cyprus, 1995), 77. Maier adds that "This traditional role of the oriental priest-king set the rulers of Pafos apart from the other monarchs on the island" (p. 77).

⁷Interestingly enough, the matter of the three mentions of Aphrodite and/or Pafos in Homer is discussed in *The Handbook of Cyprus*, a booklet written for the British visiting or intending to live in Cyprus (first published in 1901). This fact is a commentary on the colonial perspective on the antique past of the island.

The most interesting of the three mentions, establishing the close connection between Aphrodite's worship and Pafos, is the following: «ἠδ' ἄρα Κύπρον ἵκανε φιλομειδής Ἀφροδίτη / ἐς Πάφον· ἐνθα δέ οἱ τέμενος βωμόν τε θύεις.» (Odyssey, viii, 362), which translates to "But laughter-loving Aphrodite went to Cyprus to Pafos, / where is her precinct and fragrant altar".

Luke, Harry Charles & Jardine, Douglas James (Eds). *The Handbook of Cyprus*. (London: Macmillan and Co Ltd, 1920).

⁸Polyainos, VIII, 48, 1.

⁹Diodoros, XX, 21, 1-3.

¹⁰The play was published in the journal *ΦιλολογικήΚύπρος* in 1967, by the journal *ΠνευματικήΚύπρος* in 1968 and finally by ΕΠΟΚ (Ελληνικός Πνευματικός Όμιλος Κύπρου) in a bilingual edition (Greek/Italian) in 1989. The translation into Italian was done by Michelle Iannelli. For the purposes of this paper, I shall be using the 1967 edition.

¹¹Habermas, Jürgen, Lennox, Sara and Lenno, Frank, “The Public Sphere: An Encyclopedia Article (1964),” *New German Critique*. (Autumn, 1974): 51.

¹²Chrisanthis, Kipros, *Axiothea*, Nicosia: *ΦιλολογικήΚύπρος*, 1967, 70-71. “Phaedra, Eteoclis, your unworthy bedfellow / As you referred to him, died honorably By his own hand. /And you also, Evrinoe, your bedfellow / Chose the same death / Rather than fall into the hands of the enemy as a slave And be humiliated. / We are weak women, the example / of our bed-companions in their actions I see.”

¹³Anagnostopoulou, Sia, “The Complexities of Greek Nationalism in its Cypriot Version” in *Nationalism in the Troubled Triangle: Cyprus, Greece and Turkey*. Oxford: Palgrave/Macmillan, 2010: 196.

¹⁴Το *εφικτό* και το *ευκαίιο*. Public Speech by President Makarios on 12.1.68.